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SOCIALIST STAGNATION

Are Spies in High Offices Succeeding in
Disrupting the Socialist Party?

By A. M. SIMONS.

Editor-in-Chief, Chicago Daily Socialist.

[EDITORIAL NOTE.—For the next four months *The Modern Magazine* will vary from its policy and admit articles dealing strictly with Socialist party matters. This is done because, while the party is admittedly at a crisis in its affairs, the situation is such that no other publication is available for a frank and searching discussion of "What Is the Matter?" Indiscriminate writings on this subject will not be admitted, for that would only aid the forces of disruption and defeat the purpose of this discussion. Only such articles will be printed as will, in the opinion of the editor, be of real value in unifying and revivifying the party so that effective work for Socialism may be resumed. When this discussion is over, *The Modern Magazine* will again be published along the lines originally laid down.]

Socialists have always boasted that they are the first to see defects in their own philosophy or movement and most merciless in denouncing them, most relentless in correcting them. The Socialist movement, like the workers whose cause it embodies, has nothing to lose. It is a tool with which to achieve emancipation from ex-

ploitation. Therefore its members seek constantly to perfect that tool. Self-criticism has come to be as much a part of the "orthodoxy" of Socialism as its democracy.

No apology is therefore necessary for any criticism I may make of our movement. But the question may be raised as to whether there is anything fundamentally the matter with the Socialist party at the present time. The membership is steadily increasing. Nearly every state is purchasing more dues stamps than at any time in its history. The number of Socialist speakers in the field is increasing. The amount of Socialist literature distributed is larger than ever before.

Yet, in spite of these facts, I believe that the Socialist party is in a most critical condition. Nor am I alone in that belief. In my position as a member of the national executive committee of the Socialist party it is my duty to study the reports made by national organizers, state secretaries and various individuals. I receive a large number of such communications each month aside from those which are presented and summarized at each meeting of the national executive committee. As editor of the Chicago Daily Socialist, an even larger number of such communications pass through my hands. Moreover, because of the central location of the office of this paper there are literally hundreds of visitors bringing word from every corner of the Union each year. It is no exaggeration to say that an average of ten states each week are represented by such visitors. There is a monotonous uniformity about the word which comes from each and all of these various sources.

With countless minor variations, which lead each one to explain that the situation in his locality is "peculiar," there comes the same story of increased membership and decreased activity, of growing sentiment and declining interest in party work, of petty squabbles between scheming officials, of inability to hold new members, and loss of militancy by old ones, of factional quarrels over insignificant issues, and of a general lack of that militant solidarity which has always been the universally boasted characteristic of a proletarian organization.

This same story comes from Chicago and New York, Montana, Indiana and Texas, Minneapolis, San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, Pittsburg, Cincinnati and Seattle. The same condition is found in large cities and in small towns. It infects whole states and disrupts ward organizations.

Tens of thousands are attracted to the Socialist party by its propaganda where hundreds are held by its work. In Chicago there have been more than three times as many persons admitted to membership during the last six years as are now in good standing. National organizers pass through a state and leave a train of locals

behind them. The next organizer passing over the same route in a few months finds little trace of the work of the one who preceded him.

Those who have noticed these defects have had their explanations and their remedies. Much of what I shall say is a compilation of the observations of hundreds of other Socialists.

There are those who account for the defects in our movement by the lack of education. There is need of better education of the membership. No one can deny that. There is a painful lack of that somewhat narrow but basic knowledge of the essentials of the Socialist philosophy which was at one time the possession of every member. I would be the last to underestimate the necessity of such knowledge, or deny that a lack of it plays some part in destroying the solidarity of the movement. The common acceptance and common knowledge of certain fundamental things is the basis of any sort of group solidarity. Yet those who urge this as the complete explanation of the present situation seem to me to be giving an excellent example of the very superficiality of which they complain. The cause is not big enough for the effect, and, moreover, I am not certain that this lack of training is not in itself partly caused by the movement itself.

Another explanation, which at first sounds almost fantastic, has been offered. It is that the Socialist party has been filled with spies, not to seek out secrets (for we have none), but to actively disrupt the movement. When this explanation was first suggested I laughed at it, as indeed did nearly all the other best informed Socialists. But little by little what seemed like evidence accumulated until today I do not think I am wrong when I say that nearly every one who has had to do with the management of the national organization, or is familiar with the whole situation has come to agree that there is at least a strong probability that secret agents play a part in the disrupting work going on within the party.

The more the facts are examined the less improbable this explanation appears. Every one knows that the unions are honeycombed with spies. Single agencies employ thousands of men for this purpose. We know that the capitalists have come to recognize that the only force that is really threatening exploitation is Socialism. They need only to look to Europe, with which most of them are familiar, to confirm their fears.

Moreover, we have very direct evidence that they do recognize the menace of Socialism. The Civic Federation is undoubtedly the organized expression of the keenest, most far-seeing and unscrupulous capitalism in America. Its policy of corrupting the union movement, tricking the leaders of labor into the position of bell-wethers by which to lead their followers to the slaughter, the

very men who compose it, all testify to the truth of this statement. This organization has definitely declared war upon Socialism. It has called for a fund of fifty thousand dollars to be used in fighting Socialism. We know that it has gathered around it and is supporting the most disreputable gang of literary prostitutes that this country has ever known, and is using them in its war upon Socialism. We know that those who have been driven out of the Socialist party because of dishonesty and immorality find a ready welcome from this defender of bourgeois morals. We know that those who manage it are adepts in the use of spies. We know that they have long been using them for other purposes. Is it, then, too fantastic a thing to suggest that some of the funds which the Civic Federation is spending in its war upon Socialism are used in the hiring of spies to act as agents of disruption within the Socialist party?

Once within the party the course of conduct for a spy is plain. He would counterfeit the fanatic. He would be a radical of the radicals. He would be intolerant and most vehement in his denunciations of capitalism. He would be extremely active in party work and very ready to show his devotion to Socialism.

So far there would be no way by which to distinguish the spy from the sincere and faithful fanatic (and I would be the last to say that the time will ever come when the Socialist movement can afford to dispense with him whom we call the fanatic).

If the spy did nothing more than this he would do little damage. But he is there to do something more. He will naturally desire posts of authority. He will be especially eager for administrative positions. He will try to create factions and to make himself the candidate of a faction. He will cling to any official position he may secure and declare that he holds it in defense of a principle. He will foster everything that makes for divisions within the party. He will be ultra-orthodox and demand the expulsion of all who do not agree with the faction from which he derives his power. He will become a professional proletarian, skilled in all the arts of the demagogue. He will attack any constructive work undertaken within the party, or by any member of the party. He will pretend to veil such attacks behind questions of principle and seek to arouse a factional struggle on every point. For in this way two objects are accomplished: the party is disrupted and the work of Socialist propaganda is hindered. He will foster all jealousies within the organization, and seek to destroy the effectiveness of any one who may be accomplishing anything for Socialism. He will play upon the petty vanities of the incompetent and the ignorant and seek to inflame them against those who are capable and willing to accomplish any work of agitation and education. When he is trusted

with party work he will permit its enterprises to fail through carelessness, or even apparent incompetence.*

Whoever is doing these things and displays these characteristics within the Socialist party is doing the work of an agent of capitalism. Whether he is receiving the pay or not is unimportant. In fact, it is a debatable question as to which is the more dangerous to a successful organization—the cheap fanatical politician who sincerely believes with regard to the Socialist party as Baer does of the coal mines, that “God in His infinite mercy has confided it to his care,” and who through petty jealousy and narrow demagoguery clings to an official position, or the paid spy of capitalism, who does these things as part of a general plan.

In either case such a person should be a marked man, to be gotten rid of by the organization as quickly as possible. The Socialist party does not need guardians in its official positions. It does not want leaders of factions there. What is needed in the offices of state and local secretaries is men who know how to reconcile differences within the party and to utilize all forces for Socialism. The place to settle questions of principle is in legislative bodies such as state and national and delegate committees or in branch and local mass meetings. The less that administrative officials have to say in such gatherings the better.

The party official who starts out to reform the party, who organizes factions or becomes the creature of one, who attacks those who are working for Socialism instead of utilizing their work and fitting it into a part of the general party work, is either incompetent or worse, and deserves no consideration in either case. *If this rule is followed and all such persons are speedily relegated to private life, then the spy can do us no harm, because it is only through these methods that disruption comes.*

Practically every one of the localities in which the party is now disorganized has one or more persons who display the characteristics described. It matters very little whether these persons are really paid agents of capitalism, or simply very cheap party politicians and loud-mouthed demagogues, *they should be gotten rid of as promptly as possible.*

It would be an evidence of superficiality to lay too much stress upon personalities, whether of spies or of pernicious mischief makers. Let us look further and see if there is any real cause for divisions within the party at the present time.

The very first thing which strikes a student of the history of

*Note.—Since this has been in manuscript I have shown it to a number of Socialists. On reading this portion the almost inevitable exclamation has been, “I see you are hitting ———,” but always a different name. At least five such names have been so inserted by persons who thought they recognized the individual described. There could hardly be any stronger proof of the existence of the type, or of the fact that no individual is especially selected for description.

the Socialist movement is that *never since such a movement existed on American soil has there been such a dearth of differences on questions of principle*. This is most glaringly evident when the alleged questions are considered. They are so peevishly contemptible that they emphasize by contrast the real questions over which the movement was once divided. And let me say right here that few things are more valuable to a Socialist movement than genuine discussions on principles. We need never fear death or lethargy when the membership is divided on questions of fundamental principle.

Today but two subjects are put forward as worthy of division by those who are seeking disruption. One of these is the conflict between "proletarians" and "intellectuals"; the other between "impossibilists" (or "revolutionists") and "opportunists."

The first is but an attempt to introduce the worn-out methods of the political demagogue of capitalism into the Socialist party. Whenever a Republican or Democratic office seeker has found his campaign ammunition completely exhausted, when all semblance of "issues" was gone, he has always fallen back upon appeals to the "horny-handed sons of toil," the "honest laborer," and, arrayed in overalls and grimy jacket, has told with tears in his eyes of how he was "born and raised in a little log cabin."

I have often heard this sort of talk from the lips of these gentlemen, but I never dreamed that I would live to hear it applauded in a Socialist meeting. When such a sentiment is applauded it is an indication at once of the dishonesty of the speaker and the ignorance of his audience.

If some of those who are designated as "intellectuals" have been guilty of snobbery, if they have been inclined to form an exclusive circle, and issue orders rather than do work, if they have been able to secure notoriety and official positions by virtue of the fact that the work of writing and speaking which they do brings them more into the public eye than some other equally important forms of party activity, then the remedy for that is simply to vote for some one else when the next election comes around. But it would be idiotic to base such balloting upon a person's occupation or education save as these constitute qualifications, or the reverse, for the position to be filled.

As a matter of fact, this distinction is so manifestly an artificial one created for purposes of internal politics that it is scarcely worthy of consideration. The Socialist philosophy of the class struggle recognizes no such distinction. We have always boasted that the achievements of science belong to Socialism, and that our greatest agent of propaganda is the spread of education. *To confess that we are incapable of utilizing such educated persons as*

come into our ranks is to confess our own inability to grasp and utilize the very philosophy of our movement.

The other artificial line which has been drawn by those who are seeking to create divisions within the Socialist movement is supposed to run between "revolutionists" and "reformers." Here again, in so far as those urging this division are sincere, the quarrel is based upon ignorance. Nowhere in America is there a Socialist movement that would not be called ultra-revolutionist in any country in Europe. In all European countries some sort of alliance is made with capitalist parties on second elections—that is, where the law requires an absolute majority and there is no candidate chosen on the first ballot. In all other countries the emphasis laid upon immediate reforms is far greater than here. Nowhere in the United States is there any proposal to leave this revolutionary position.

Wherever this line of division is drawn it generally ends in both sides entering into a contest to manufacture "revolutionary" phrases, *while neither side finds time to take any revolutionary action.*

In the midst of this controversy there has been a tendency by both sides to lay too much emphasis upon the collection of votes and dues. Without any direct compromise of principles there has been sometimes a shifting of emphasis in speeches and writings until it sounds as if Socialism was being apologized for. There seems to be a tendency to avoid mention of the fundamental principles of Socialism and to neglect the actual work of fighting present battles. As a result, we are learning that the expression, "He who seeketh his soul shall lose it," applies to votes and membership.

Education and action must be combined. It is true that the capitalists of Chicago paid little attention to Socialist speakers while they talked only of abstract questions and made appeals for more members and a larger vote. Neither did the speakers get the members or the votes. When the street corner orators began to tell of the corruption in the city government and to show its connection with the maintenance of class rule the police called the patrol wagon. It is doubtful, however, if the wagon would have been called had the speakers not been showing the connection between graft and capitalism. Otherwise the police and those behind them would have looked upon the attacks on graft as part of an ordinary "reform crusade" which would soon blow over.

That the question of "impossibilism" and "opportunism" as presented in this country has very little to do with the effectiveness of the party is shown by the very significant fact that the two places on this continent in which the Socialist movement presents the

most solid and militant front, and where it is doing the most for the working class and is most feared by the capitalist class are Milwaukee and British Columbia. The first is commonly instanced as being the most "opportunistic," the second as the limit of "impossibilism."

There are two characteristics which the movements in these localities have in common. They are in the actual class fight and they educate their members in the fundamentals of Socialism. The Wisconsin trade unionists and the workers in general look upon the Socialists as waging their fight. The Socialist party is not something apart from the general labor movement—it is the political expression of that movement. The same is true in British Columbia. When the coal miners of that locality are fighting for better conditions they know that the Socialist members of the local parliament are fighting with them. To be sure, the same thing is supposed to be true everywhere. But in some way the Socialist party in most localities has lost direct touch with the class struggle.

Here, in my opinion, is the basic difficulty with the party at the present moment. It is not in sufficiently close touch with the real fight of the workers. It has somehow been caught in a backwash of the industrial current and has become academic rather than militant, a vote and dues gathering machine rather than a vital expression of the class struggle.

Whenever and wherever the Socialist party is composed largely of the same individuals who compose the economic movement, and where they are active in each of these movements, many of the difficulties now complained of disappear. Where the Socialist party is busy doing things, where it is participating directly in all the struggles of labor, where it is really in the class struggle and not simply talking about it, there is little room for either spies or petty politicians to do any harm.

EDITORIAL

▲ ▲ B y P E Y T O N B O S W E L L ▲ ▲

WHAT IS THE MATTER?

It has not been without due deliberation that the *Modern Magazine* has decided to open its pages for four months to a consideration of the question, "What is the matter with the Socialist party?" In doing so it departs—only temporarily, however—from its original policy of excluding directly partisan matters from its pages. It also is bound to incur the resentment of certain persons within the Socialist party who, rightfully or wrongfully, will consider themselves to be the targets aimed at. The *Modern Magazine* runs the risk of offending these persons knowingly and advisedly. They may do some hurt to the publication, but to stand back on this account would be to enact the role of a "trimmer," to use a current expression. After all, however, it is the rank and file of Socialists who do the work of circulating Socialist literature. The leaders of the movement, or at least that part of them who will fancy themselves nipped by this magazine, are of little value in this respect, anyway, they being as a rule too busy keeping in the limelight and practicing the arts of politics to do any real constructive work.

The Socialist party cannot any too soon unify itself, purge itself of petty, jealous leadership and plunge once more into the work of making Socialists. If the present condition continues, the result will be as inevitable as it will be disastrous. With the Socialists isolated—a separate, wrangling, tangled, biting knot of self-destroying worms—with the Socialist party aloof from the real battle, it will be easy for the Civic Federation to launch its prospective decoy labor party, with Sam Gompers and John Mitchell at the head, thus setting the social revolution back by many years.

Nor is all this based on a false assumption. That the Socialist party is in a state of stagnation there can be no doubt. With the country full of Socialist sentiment, party growth is almost at a standstill; in some localities there is even retrogression and dissolution.

Can it be that the disappointment in not polling a million votes in 1908 has so paralyzed the party that it is no longer able to resist the powers within it which tend to self-destruction?

It is high time that the rank and file of Socialists pull themselves together and find the answer to the question, "What is the matter with the Socialist party?"